# LIVING THE ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH UNIVERSITY SERVICE AND SERVICE-LEARNING: PHRONESIS AND PRAXIS RECONSIDERED

Anotonina Lukenchuk National-Louis University

## ON SERVICE, PROFESSIONAL EXPECTATIONS, AND SERVICE-LEARNING

There was nothing serendipitous about my discovery of service-learning (SL) when I joined the ranks of a university's faculty a few years ago. Finding out that service would be expected of me as part of my professional obligation turned out to be a "happy accident." The choices of service suggested in the *Faculty Handbook* sounded trite and prescriptive, and for a while, I attended to my professional duties with some unsettled feelings.

However, my first encounter with service-learning convinced me in its potential to fulfill my university service in more meaningful ways than I had initially expected. A truly surprising moment in the beginning of my SL odyssey was the realization that I had been doing SL for as long as I can remember. I grew up and was educated in a country where service was naturally integrated into the lives of children and adults, and we all were expected to provide services to others unconditionally.

Because I have been shaped by different ideologies and I have lived through different circumstances, my notion of service has certainly undergone a series of transformations over time. Yet the question remains as to what constitutes meaningful university service. How can we measure the extent to which university faculty should be engaged in service? What can and should be the role of service-learning in higher education?

In the past few years, a national debate has emerged regarding higher education's response to the need for revitalizing constructive democratic engagement and building civic society. The development of SL programs was one of the initiatives launched by higher educational institutions in response to the needs and goals of reconstructive democracy. This response is based on a belief that "civic engagement of ordinary citizens with voluntary associations, social institutions, and government in local communities is a central feature of strong democracies."<sup>2</sup>

For over a decade, I have been teaching educational foundations in graduate teacher education programs that pointedly emphasize critical democratic ends and expect their graduates to carry on the ideals of democracy throughout their lives. I would ponder various ways of teaching for democracy and social justice that would ensure academic rigor as well as meaningful and

memorable experiences for my students. Since its re-emergence in my life, service-learning seems to provide the most workable and satisfactory answer.

In this paper, I will consider the notion of service-learning as essentially different from other similar activities, such as philanthropy, charity, voluntarism, or a single act of kindness which are "one-way" socially engaged activities. Service-learning is different because it necessarily entails reciprocity and mutuality which are "two-way" relationships. SL is about serving *and* learning—learning by doing, acting, affecting, intervening, problem-solving, reflecting, and acting again.

My preoccupation with what constitutes meaningful university service, how much of it can suffice, and how it is justified has led me to reconsider the nature of service with regard to its relationality. Since service cannot be divorced from other professional activities in higher education, and serving on various committees, in my mind, does not seem to satisfy intellectual curiosity or creativity, it is reasonable to assume that some of us might be seeking other venues to fulfill our university service expectations. Unfortunately, service is "marginalized as an academic activity, and faculty members may perceive the need to perform only a limited amount of service since quality of teaching and research are much more highly valued."

Given that service remains a requirement for tenure and promotion and that some institutions take service more seriously than others, philosophical discussions on the value of service in academia seem to be timely and necessary. In this regard, service-learning should be taken into consideration as one, or even perhaps the most meaningful way to meet professional service requirements. Faculty service-learning engagement can certainly contribute to elevating the status of service in the education profession, and put it on a par with teaching and research.

I will further contend that service-learning pedagogy models critical democratic praxis rooted in "practical wisdom" (phronesis), as opposed to "true knowledge" (episteme) or "scientific knowledge" (techne). With regard to phronetic deliberations, service and service-learning by extension, will be examined through the lens of Hannah Arendt's typology of fundamental human activities (labor, work, and action). I will argue that service-learning conceived as vita activa, in Arendt's terms, is an expression of plurality, our collective social and political engagement, and an embodiment of critical democratic aspirations and practices.

By juxtaposing service and service-learning, I will extend the arguments to the sphere of ethics by employing Levinas's "first philosophy." Whereas Arendt's proposition "to think what we are doing" firmly relies on classical, albeit revitalized Aristotelian epistemology (knowing the good entails doing the good), Levinas insists that one does the good before knowing it; that is, ethics occurs prior to thought, essence, or being. Instead of "love of

wisdom," Levinas proposes "the wisdom of love"—an infinite responsibility of being-for-the-other before oneself. In my view, service and service-learning conceived as responsibility for the Other (*Autrui*), in Levinas's terms, takes critical democratic praxis to yet a higher humanistic plane and thus is truly indispensible in its relational power.

Finally, because of my lived experiences with service-learning, I have come to believe in "living" theory and practice, and in the power of service-learning to fulfill my professional obligations and certainly my sense of beingfor-the-other before myself, my own humanity. Service-learning, in my mind, is an unmatched activity that brings about the "good life" of doing the good before even knowing it.

### DELIBERATING SERVICE AND SERVICE-LEARNING

Service usually evokes the imagery of dedication, noble actions, duty, or sacrifice in both secular and religious contexts. The word "service" comes from the Latin *servus* ("slave") denoting "occupation of a servant; public employment; work done for others; any religious ceremony; benefit; advantage; friendly help; professional aid." Added to this list are "assistance, courtesy, duty, labor, kindness, ritual, military action, duty." 5

Despite its original allusion to slave labor, service in most parts of the world means predominantly noble enterprise and free agency. Semantically related to *service* are the words *subservience* and *servitude* which presuppose the acts of willingly providing service, but also imply submissiveness, obedience, and bondage. It is important, for the purposes of further discussion on service-learning, to distinguish service from subservience and servitude.

Alexander Griboyedov<sup>6</sup> points out a distinct characteristic of service first articulated in the words of the protagonist in his famous play *Woe from Wit*, and a sentiment that would become a popular catch phrase: "I'd be happy to serve, but it is subservience that sickens me." The literal translation of the phrase does not do justice to the sarcasm that Griboyedov unleashes against functionaries, toadies, bureaucrats, pinheads, sycophants, and bootlickers of all sorts. Similar to the destiny of his character, Griboyedov held public service in the highest esteem; he lived and died attending to his duties as a diplomat and a person of integrity.

For the majority of people in my former country, the literary works of highly acclaimed authors, and not so much ideologies, served as catalysts for a moral orientation toward the "good life." Literary characters captured our imaginations, and often portrayed real-life persons and their deeds as worthy of emulating. My conception of service, to a great extent, was shaped by the literature, history, and lived experiences acquired through the cultural context of my former country. Service, not subservience, guided my upbringing and education.

Life lived under new circumstances and in different ideological contexts made me reconsider my previously internalized conceptions of service. Now that service was required as part of my professional duties and would be subsequently rewarded, I was forced to search for more concrete and intentional ways of fulfilling it. Relatively vague evaluation criteria for service to the profession, the institution, and the community only added to my anxiety about how much would suffice. The timely arrival of service-learning in my life dispelled many ambiguities and eased some of the anxious feelings and attitudes that surrounded the idea of professional service.

Service-learning has a distinct and remarkable history in the U.S. Its beginnings are to be found in the social and political activism of the 1930s, and in the progressive tradition in politics and education that grounds knowledge and learning in experience. Dewey insisted that we learn essentially by and from experience and that education should meet public needs and be responsive to the conditions of modern life. Although Dewey himself never mentioned the term *service-learning*, the pedagogical goals and methods of service-learning clearly find affinity with his philosophy. Progressive education suggests that "service-learning should take the form of education in community organizing and community-building."

The Depression, the civil rights movement, and the War on Poverty helped to shape the ideologies of service-learning. Service-learning was grounded in the "democratic commitment to educating citizens for democratic change and the enfranchisement of minorities through social action." The expansion of service-learning programs in higher education has led to the development of multiple models of service-learning pedagogy. The debates continue with regard to what constitutes the proper practice of service-learning and how SL is justified.

Service-learning is most often defined as an "approach to teaching and learning in which service and learning are blended in a way that both occur and are enriched by the other." Service-learning intentionally links service with the academic curriculum; it addresses community needs while students learn through active engagement and reflection. SL differs essentially from community service and voluntarism precisely because it integrates organically the components of service, learning, reflection, and civic responsibility.

For some, the focus of service-learning is external and interpersonal; it "enhances a student's educational experience, sustains democratic culture, strengthens democratic institutions, and advances social justice." Yet for others, service-learning is limited to internal, philanthropic justifications that do not seek to transform societal or educational institutions. The emergence of the civic engagement model of service-learning in recent years signaled that "democracy demands equal participation and voice by all citizens." The strength of this model is in its "utility in leveraging the resources of higher educational institutions to address pressing social problems."

Civic engagement is rooted in the principle of reciprocity that encourages a truly collaborative relationship among community and university partners. Service-learning as civic engagement is what Sheffield calls a "bridge-building endeavor." Civic engagement "renews and alters the focus of higher education institutions on service as the focal point of their mission of teaching, research, and professional service" and represents a "new voice at the table in discussions of reform within higher education."

SL enhances the role of faculty service beyond its operational definitions. Undoubtedly, it has transformed my understanding of what it means to serve in the education profession. Service-learning has been incremental in the stepping stones of my career, be it my teaching, conducting research, or performing university service. I have internalized and practiced SL as "living pedagogy" which has its ends in the "humanitarian values of care and compassion" <sup>16</sup>

#### SERVICE-LEARNING AS PHRONESIS AND PRAXIS

Service-learning as civic engagement presupposes a purposive and intentional action, the end result of which is, generally speaking, pragmatic. SL intends to intervene, to make an impact, to change, or to transform the state of affairs on a small or larger scale. The kind of knowledge that is "produced" as a result of SL actions falls within the traditional epistemology of "practical wisdom" usually attributed to Aristotle who, in contrast to Plato, valued the "everyday experience of embodied human beings interacting with the world, others, and self."

"Practical wisdom" (phronesis) allows for deliberating about and choosing good actions (praxis). When properly and successfully applied, phronesis leads to a fully actualized and therefore "good life." Our search for alternatives to technical-rational paradigms for practical decisions often obscures the value of classical epistemological models for proposing effective and imaginative ways of thinking and acting. Regardless of apparent flaws, the Aristotelian view about the role of practical wisdom in living a full and flourishing life has resonated with many contemporary scholars. Aristotle's notion of phronesis perhaps finds its most original interpretation in the works of Hannah Arendt, a scholar who holds a "unique place among contemporary philosophers for her compelling and insightful critique of modern society." 18

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt expresses deep concerns about the decline of genuine political life in contemporary Western democracies and urges us "to think what we are doing," to invigorate a sense of the good and purposeful life through the synergy of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. The term *vita activa*, Arendt claims, is overloaded in the Western tradition of political thought which has lost its specifically political meaning. Arendt uses the term to underly all its activities and to make it "neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*."

Arendt revitalizes the Aristotelian notion of *bios politikos*—the life "devoted to the matters of the *polis*," the "realm of human affairs," stressing action, or *praxis*, as the activity that will "establish and sustain it." Through acting and speaking, through "good deeds" and "good words," which Arendt equates with full engagement in social and political life, we can reclaim the lost meaning of our *bios politikos* and restore the notion of the good life. In the evolutionary process of re-awakening *bios politicos*, Arendt distinguishes between several fundamental human activities—"labor," "work," and "action," and asserts that of these only "action" epitomizes genuine *praxis* and thus a fully engaged and realized ("good") life. Although labor and work are worthwhile practices, they cannot fulfill our social and political aspirations and ambitions.

Labor corresponds to "the biological process of the human body," and the human condition of labor is "life itself." Work is the activity that corresponds to "the unnaturalness of human existence. Work provides an 'artificial' world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. The human condition of work is worldliness." Action is the condition of plurality. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is "specifically *the* condition of all political life." It is action as *phronesis* that makes our lives truly purposeful, meaningful, fulfilled, and, therefore, genuinely political.

Arendt's typology of fundamental human activities can be applied to differentiate between various notions of service and models of service-learning. As mentioned in previous sections, service in higher education is most often rendered through operational definitions and as such it corresponds to Arendt's notions of "labor" and "work," lacking, in my mind, an essential component of service—"action," or *praxis*.

I find it striking, oftentimes, that our exalted articulations of service in the university mission statements fall short in the eyes of those who earnestly seek their fulfillment. How do our missions actually contribute to the livelihood of critical democratic education? Arendt urges us to deliberate and undertake the kinds of actions that will keep our democracy well and alive. Service-learning, in my view, can fulfill this mission as truly democratic *praxis*—the collective power that "keeps the public realm in existence and disappears when the condition of plurality comes to an end."<sup>24</sup> Service-learning has the capacity to sustain and enhance the human condition of plurality in which "the server" and "the served" share "distinctness and equality" which are "the two constituent elements of bodies politic."<sup>25</sup>

In sum, meaningful and powerful service is the result of the synergy of *phronesis* and *praxis*, *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*—the highest fundamental human activities that nurture and move democracy forward, and make our lives purposeful, fulfilled, and therefore "good." Service as praxis in education clearly ensures its critical democratic ends. Understood in Arendt's

terms, service and service-learning can be antidotes to public escapism and the promise of politics—the "oases" and "life-giving sources." <sup>26</sup>

Positioning service within Arendt's typology of fundamental human activities justifies it as part of pragmatic and political deliberations and actions. It follows that knowing the good necessarily entails doing the good; that is, our reliance on reason seems to be inescapable. But is it really so? Is reason alone sufficient for good actions?

# ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER. SERVICE-LEARNING AS ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Levinas stands in opposition to classical intellectualism and the primacy of foundational thought. His critique of metaphysics puts an end to onto-theo-logical ethics of other worldly principles. Ethics, according to Levinas, occurs prior to essence and being. Instead of posing the question *to be or not to be*, we have to consider what ought to be, which is the ethical question. The ethical question is about the compassion of being, an infinite responsibility for other human beings:

Ethics, concern for the being of the other-than-one-self, non-indifference toward the death of the other, and hence the possibility of dying for the other—a chance for holiness—would be the expansion of that ontological contradiction that is expressed by the verb to be, dis-inter-estedness breaking the obstinacy of being, opening the order of the human, of grace, and of sacrifice.<sup>27</sup>

Levinas's position should be understood in the intellectual and spiritual climate of the twentieth century debate over the nature of philosophy and the worth of humanism. During the WWII, Levinas was a prisoner of war in a labor camp for Jewish French soldiers. His parents and siblings were murdered by the Nazis but he survived. In response to the personal and collective tragedy, Levinas returns love for hate—the "wisdom of love" and the humanism of the Other. Moral responsibility to and for the other person, argues Levinas, leads to the demand for justice for all others and for all humanity.

Responsibility for the Other is the "essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity." Levinas's subject is plural: it is the encounter with another human being. The existence of other human beings and encounters with them make us feel infinitely responsible. All human beings are equally and reciprocally obliged. There is a fundamental equality and similarity between myself and all other people, maintains Levinas.

However, the intersubjective relation is non-symmetrical in a sense that I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity. "Reciprocity is *his* affair. It is I who support all. You know that sentence in Dostoyevsky: 'We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others." Yet this original asymmetry should not be "obscured or forgotten by

concentration on the secondary truth of our equality and its realm in which I myself, like other people, am a replaceable instance of one universal 'being-human.'',30

Levinas did not fully develop his social philosophy based on the intersubjective relation. The problem remains as to how much of ourselves we ought to dedicate to others. Levinas makes me ponder about my sense of obligation in relation to my profession and to all others. How do I teach by exercising my sense of responsibility? As a teacher, I am in a very close proximity to my students; I possess the power of rhetoric to move them. Students must "feel for" the teacher, argues Levinas; they must identify with him or her:

Without empathy, teaching can provide data, information, and certain forms of knowledge, but as if from another world that, in its absolute difference, is devoid of the transformative power necessary for education. Conversely, the idea (or ideal) of absolute empathy renders teaching redundant, suggesting, as it does, an extreme maeiutics where the evaporation of distance and difference between teacher and student would leave rhetoric nothing to do. It is between these two poles that the teaching strategy of the rhetorical needs to be situated.<sup>31</sup>

Relationality of Levinas's ethics clearly represents a contested ground. How many of my personal gains do I sacrifice for my relation to the others, be they my students, colleagues, loved ones, or strangers? Levinas legitimizes egocentrism with its hedonistic tendencies; there is nothing wrong in pursuing personal ends, being happy, and enjoying life's little pleasures. Yet we are more than our basic instincts and needs. The other's existence puts limits on my right to satisfy myself and reveals to me the primary sense of obligation—my responsibility for the Other:

The justification of my nestling in the world—and the appropriation, labor, and consumption by which it is accompanied—does not lie in the necessity of my satisfaction but in the dedication to others that thereby becomes possible. To realize my responsibility for the Other, I myself must be free and independent; but the sense of my selfhood is my being-for-the-Other.<sup>32</sup>

Levinas describes the evolving sense of our true humanity as the process of "awakening," "sobering up," the "awakening of our moral obligation." This process is about unlimited self-giving and serving others. The true selfhood of the self occurs precisely in and as service. Stemming from Levinas's ethics are the very precepts of service-learning, regardless of its models or ideological justifications. Those of us who choose service-learning over other socially and politically engaged activities share an understanding of service as a moral obligation that supersedes prescribed professional duties and

expectations. Service is and should be, in my mind, about ethical responsibility—the responsibility and concern for the Other.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this paper, I have developed the notion of service as essentially different from servitude or subservience, and service-learning as essentially different from other similar activities. Service-learning is more than occasional visits to soup kitchens, shelters, or resource centers; it is a philosophy of "human growth and purpose, a social vision, and a way of knowing."<sup>34</sup>

The conception of service-learning, although grounded in the progressive tradition, certainly moves beyond its limitations. Service-learning is compatible with what Arendt calls *praxis*—the condition of plurality, the power of our collective action in public-political affairs. As a counterpoint of social escapism and nihilism, service-learning is a life-giving force that seeks an outlet to move, touch, change, and transform people's lives.

Serving others brings forth our humanity which is defined by our responsibility and care for the Other. Encountering the Other reawakens our sense of selfhood and shows not what we are but what we ought to be—sources of infinite compassion and reciprocal solidarity. Conceived as unconditional service and moral responsibility, service-learning is an ideal worthy to strive for and approximate.

Service-learning sustains the scholarship of engagement because SL and other forms of civic engagement are intrinsic to the faculty roles of teaching, research, and professional service. Involvement in community-based research can "reduce the traditional boundaries between research universities, small teaching institutions, and community colleges."

Regardless of theoretical orientations, service-learning has the potential for addressing a crisis of community in the twenty-first century that is as problematic as the one defined by Dewey, Addams, and Day in the early 1800s—the crisis of social, political, intellectual and moral fragmentation:

While some might argue that the crisis has changed today by the political and social forces accompanying globalization, technology, and social welfare, few would argue that a crisis of community does not exist today and that fragmentation is at the root of it. Questions of equality, justice, and citizenship in a democratic society are fertile ground for service-learning regardless of the philosophical basis." <sup>36</sup>

On a lighter note, when it comes to choices in fashion, I opt for what fits *me* most without blindly following the vogue. This paper was not meant as a "selling" device or a prescription for a better life. When it comes to service, I choose service-learning not because it can earn me tenure, promotion, or

professional and public recognition; I choose it because of my concern for the being other-than-my-self.

#### **NOTES**

- 1. Barbara Jacoby and Associates, *Building Partnerships for Service-Learning* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
- 2. J. B. Watson, Jr., "A Justification of the Civic Engagement Model," in *Service-Learning: History, Theory, and Issues*, eds. Bruce W. Speck and Sherry L. Hoppe (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 73.
- 3. Ibid., 77.
- 4. Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language (NY: Fawcett Popular Library, 1979), 544.
- 5. Roget's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Thesaurus (NY: The Philip Lief Group, Inc., 1993), 650.
- 6. Alexander Griboyedov (1795-1829), a Russian playwright, composer, and diplomat, was one of the authors who comprised the mandatory curriculum in Russian Literature in all public schools in the former USSR. Griboyedov's catch phrases and quotes became so popular among people that they were widely used in everyday contexts. Griboyedov's literary works were deeply philosophical; his biography continues to captivate researchers and literary critics. Griboyedov served as the secretary of the Russian legation in Persia, and was later transferred to Georgia. He died in Tehran, Persia, during anti-Russian riots, one of which targeted the Russian embassy. Laurence Kelly, *Diplomacy and Murder in Tehran: Alexander Griboyedov and Imperial Russia's Mission to the Shah of Persia* (London: Tauris Parker Paperbacks, 2006) is one of several sources on Griboyedov's biography in English.
- 7. *Woe from Wit* is Griboyedov's most well-known play, first published in 1833.
- 8. Bruce W. Speck and Sherry L Hoppe, eds., *Service-Learning: History, Theory, and Issues* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 18.
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- 12. J. B. Watson, Jr., "A Justification of the Civic Engagement Model," in *Service-Learning: History, Theory, and Issues*, eds. Bruce W. Speck and Sherry L. Hoppe (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 75.
- 13. Ibid., 77.
- 14. Eric C. Sheffield, "Root Metaphors, Paradigm Shifts, and Democratically Shared Values: Community Service-Learning as a Bridge-Building Endeavor," *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 38 (2007), 105.
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- 16. Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff, *Action Research: Living Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006).
- 17. Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Practice and the Human Sciences: The Case for a Judgement-Based Practice of Care* (NY: SUNY Press, 2004), 106.
- 18. Trevor Norris, "Re-thinking Re-producing Consumption: Hannah Arendt, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Possession," *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 36 (2005): 77-90, 82.
- 19. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 17.
- 20. Ibid., 13.
- 21. Ibid., 7.
- 22. Ibid., 7.
- 23. Ibid., 7.
- 24. Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (NY: Schoken Books. 2005), 202.
- 25. Ibid., 62.
- 26. Ibid., 203.
- 27. Emmanuel Levinas, *On Thinking-of-the-Other: Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), 202.
- 28. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 95.
- 29. Ibid., 98.
- 30. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, Robert Bernasconi, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 28.
- 31. Gary Peters, *Irony and Singularity: Aesthetic Education from Kant to Levinas* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 144.

- 32. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, Robert Bernasconi, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, 25.
- 33. Emmanuel Levinas, On Thinking-of-the-Other: Entre Nous, 114.
- 34. Anderson, Swich, Yff, Service-Learning in Teacher Education, 23.
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- 36. Sherry L. Hoppe, "A Synthesis of the Theoretical Stances," in *Service-Learning: History, Theory, and Issues*, eds. Bruce W. Speck and Sherry L. Hoppe (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 147.